Summit on the Information Society, primarily through implementation of the Istanbul Action Plan.

The Summit has been particularly successful in increasing the international recognition of the importance of information and communication technologies in the area of development. The Summit has provided a global, inclusive platform for all participants to harness the potential of ICT and to achieve the development goals of the UN Millennium Declaration.

The Summit witnessed the emergence of new stakeholders in the area of ICT. A number of these stakeholders are actively engaged in promoting ICT for development and are poised to benefit from the successful outcome of the Geneva phase. This is a development we at ITU welcome. International cooperation among all stakeholders represents, in my view, the key ingredient to implementing the WSIS Declaration and Plan of Action, and to transforming the digital divide into digital opportunities.

As we embark on preparations for the Tunis phase of the Summit, the international community's number one priority should be to maintain the momentum, goodwill, and widespread international consensus generated during the first phase of the Summit. Despite the fact that the Geneva phase remained largely silent on how the outcomes of the first phase would be implemented, what the expected results of the Tunis phase would be, and how preparations would be carried out for this second phase, all stakeholders need to commit to a proactive role in the implementation of the Geneva phase results and to the substantive preparations for the Tunis phase.

The success of the Geneva phase of the Summit, the momentum created by the Summit among all relevant stakeholders of the Information Society, and indeed, the focus provided by the Summit to the development component of the Information Society, have all contributed to placing the development of ICT at the forefront of the global development agenda. The ITU looks forward to associating itself with all players in the ICT field, in order that we may fulfill our common desire and commitment to build a people-centered, inclusive, development-oriented Information Society.

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Welcome to the Aircraft Hangar of Babel

Jamie Cowling

Experienced conference junkies will tell you there are four ways to gauge the importance of a meeting. First, the quality of the speakers and delegates. Conferences are subject to network effects: the better the speakers, the more delegates; the more delegates, the better the chance of someone you know ringing you up and asking if you will be there. Any more than three of these calls and attendance becomes obligatory. Second, location, location, location. The professional delegate understands that if you are going to spend between three hours and three days in one place, an interesting environment from which to gaze through the window during the fifteenth plenary speech is vital to maintaining sanity. Third, the possibility of policy change; this is, after all, why we do it. Finally, and most important of all, the quality of the goody bag. Like a children's party, the guests ultimately judge the quality of the event by the gifts they receive.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), according to the UN, aimed to bring together heads of state, leading business executives, NGOs, and members of civil society to develop a better understanding of the revolution brought about by information and communications technologies (ICTs) and their impact on the international community. The first phase in Geneva adopted a Declaration of Principles and developed a Plan of Action to be reviewed at the second stage Summit in Tunis in 2005.

So, did WSIS live up to these grand ambitions? The chosen location was certainly an interesting one. Geneva has a reputation as a pretty town by a lake. This is partly true. Geneva Old Town is extremely pretty with narrow cobbled streets and a wide range of chocolate shops and bars selling *vin chaud* to warm weary delegates. WSIS wasn't in the Old Town. The Summit was held in a cavernous, windowless hall by the airport in an area that makes Swindon seem like a World Heritage site. Attending WSIS recalled McLuhan's vision: the world village in an aircraft hangar—the aircraft hangar of Babel.

There was a photo opportunity of world leaders. Well, not exactly world leaders. The developing nations sent heads of state, the United Kingdom sent

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Stephen Timms, Minister of State for Energy, e-commerce and Postal Services at the Department for Trade and Industry. Of course, Stephen Timms is an excellent Minister with a good grasp of the issues at stake, and no doubt the Cabinet had better things to do listening to Gordon Brown's Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister) and number two in the U.K. Government pre-budget report.

It was hard not to get the impression that the developed world (not just the United Kingdom) took WSIS less seriously than the developing states. But perhaps heads of state in the developed world don't need to go to Geneva to do their Christmas shopping. Geneva is also one of the most expensive cities in Europe. Perhaps not the most diplomatic approach for an event which, at least in part, was supposed to focus on the contribution ICTs can make to the Millennium Development Goals.

WSIS had been roundly criticized before the Summit even began. The declaration and action plan were worthless stitch-ups. The conference was just an opportunity for a massive corporate sales pitch to the developing world; and it is a waste of time to talk about the Information Society in countries where primary schooling is a rarity rather than a right.

Many of these criticisms were born out at the Summit itself. The ICT for Development (ICT4D) hall was a trade show featuring stands ranging from NTT DotCoMo, the Japanese mobile company demonstrating their latest 150 USD 3G mobile phones, to the Myanmar World Distribution Company stand informing delegates of Myanmar's vital role in the Information Society. One stand promised that evoting would raise participation and offered bottles of wine to volunteers prepared to trust them with their fingerprints, begging the question whether evoting or wine for votes would best breath life into the corpse of the body politic. Make it *Smirnoff Ice* and 16-year-olds would queue round the block.

The President of Azerbeijan's plenary speech underlined the importance of freedom of information to the global society. According to Reporters sans Frontières since official state censorship in Azerbaijan ended, state pressure on independent

media continues with journalists regularly imprisoned and killed.¹

Robert Mugabe, despot and pillager of Zimbabwe (aka President), took a USD \$4,500-a-night presidential suite on the shores of Lake Geneva (*The Times*, December 11, 2003). In three years Zimbabwe's GDP has fallen by a third. According to the World Bank, GDP per capita fell in Zimbabwe by 9.8% in 2001 and a further 6.6% in 2002.² Perhaps most poignant of all was the delegate from the Ministry of Communications in Niger who stated that his Minister is extremely keen on the idea of edemocracy and saw it as a key priority for his country. In 2002 Niger had 15,000 Internet users, from a population of approximately 11 million.³ Perhaps more importantly, only 17.6% of the population is able to read and write (ibid.).

So was WSIS a waste of time? The critiques of WSIS are as old as the British party conference season and these gripes are as familiar as smoke-filled rooms to union barons. The declaration and action plan are a stitch-up, and leaving aside the controversial (and crucial) issues, brands were often as prominent as principles and some pretty unsavory people spoke passionately, arguing that others should do as they say and not as they do.

Solana Larsen's article for Opendemocracy⁴ argued that there were four key debates for the summit itself: how to bridge the digital divide, opensource software vs. Microsoft, intellectual property, and freedom and security on the Internet and Internet governance.

The Summit Plan of Action bravely concluded that to bridge the digital divide, "we need to use more efficiently existing approaches and mechanisms and fully explore new ones," arguing that (poor) countries need to promote a transparent and stable investing environment. To those cynics who believe the issue may have been firmly punted into the long grass, delegates can point to the agreement to request that the UN conduct a review of existing financial resources by the end of 2004 and to consider the effectiveness and feasibility of a digital solidarity fund. In other words, "we the people of

^{1.} http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article?8769.

^{2.} httpL//www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/aag/zwe_aag/pdf

^{3.} http://www.doci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ng,html#Comm

^{4.} http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-8-10-1630.jsp

the world agree to hold even more conferences as soon as possible."

The Plan of Action was completely clear on the issue of open-source software. According to the plan, governments, through public/private partnerships naturally, should promote both proprietary and open-source software. So that's clear, then. Perhaps the most positive note for those who believe that Microsoft is creating one desktop to rule them all was to be found in the Summit Cybercafe that resolutely ran Linux rather than Windows with all things Microsoft banished to the ICT4D platform.

Questions from the floor at fringe meetings, when not promoting their own publications, regularly raised the issue of Internet regulation. Participants appeared to agree that ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) was in need of reform but feared that, to paraphrase one participant, "an organization based on bribery like the UN," was not the organization to do it. Nicholas Negroponte pondered that in 10 years' time WSIS may consider the issue of deregulation of the Internet. If the UN is to consider the issue within 10 years, then the productivity benefits of the digital revolution would be put beyond doubt. Given that the Declaration of Principles called for the promotion of cybersecurity, Internet regulation will be an explosive debate in the future.

Intellectual property rights (IPR) emerged as a key issue for the Summit. The Declaration of Principles steered a course between the need for IPR protection and the chilling effect that an overemphasis on protection could have on creativity and innovation, particularly in developing states. John Gage, chief researcher at Sun Microsystems, lent his support to Prof. Lawrence Lessig's⁵ Creative Commons.⁶ The Creative Commons attempts to break the current impasse through an innovative approach to copyright protection.

Summits like WSIS serve to air these crucial issues. WSIS featured some excellent fringe debates and enabled groups from all over the world to come together and discuss their needs and wants. The rules governing intellectual property rights emerged as a key issue for global development, as did the need for a realistic approach to what ICTs can and cannot achieve. We only know that the Declaration

of Principles and Plan of Action are a fudge precisely because they were produced. The challenge is to ensure that Tunis does better.

Oh, and the Swiss chocolates inside the conference bag were excellent. ■

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^{5.} http://www.lessig.org/blog/.

^{6.} http://creativecommons.org/.